

Fungus could wipe out Philippine bananas: growers

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Workers pack freshly harvested bananas in the southern Philippine island of Mindanao in 2008. A disease that has ravaged banana plantations across Southeast Asia could wipe out the Philippine industry in three years unless the government finds a cure, a growers' group warned Monday.

A disease that has ravaged banana plantations across Southeast Asia could wipe out the Philippine industry in three years unless the government finds a cure, a growers' group warned Monday.

The disease, called Fusarium wilt, is caused by a fast-spreading fungus that kills the plant, said Stephen Antig, executive director of the Pilipino Banana Growers and Exporters Association.

"So far, it has already infected 1,200 hectares (2,950 acres) of banana plantations locally, although that figure can go higher," Antig told AFP.

"If we can not contain this and it remains unchecked, then in less than three years our banana industry will die."

The [Philippines](#) is the second biggest exporter of [bananas](#) in the world behind Ecuador with about 70,000 hectares of plantations, according to the association.

The banana sector is also the country's fifth largest export industry, directly employing 280,000 people, it said.

"Losing this industry will have a huge impact on our economy," Antig said.

The Philippines exports the Cavendish variety of banana, which is the most popular type around the world, according to Antig.

He said the disease wiped out the then-popular Gros Michel bananas in Central America and the Caribbean in the 1960s.

The disease also destroyed Cavendish plantations in Indonesia and Malaysia in the 1990s.

Traces of the fungus were found in controllable levels in the Philippines five years ago, Antig said.

But a more virulent type of the [fungus](#) emerged last month and quickly began spreading through [plantations](#) in the southern region of Mindanao, where most of the country's banana exports come from, he said.

Antig urged the government to fast-track the creation of a research institute to enable local growers to develop a fruit variety that is resistant to the disease.

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